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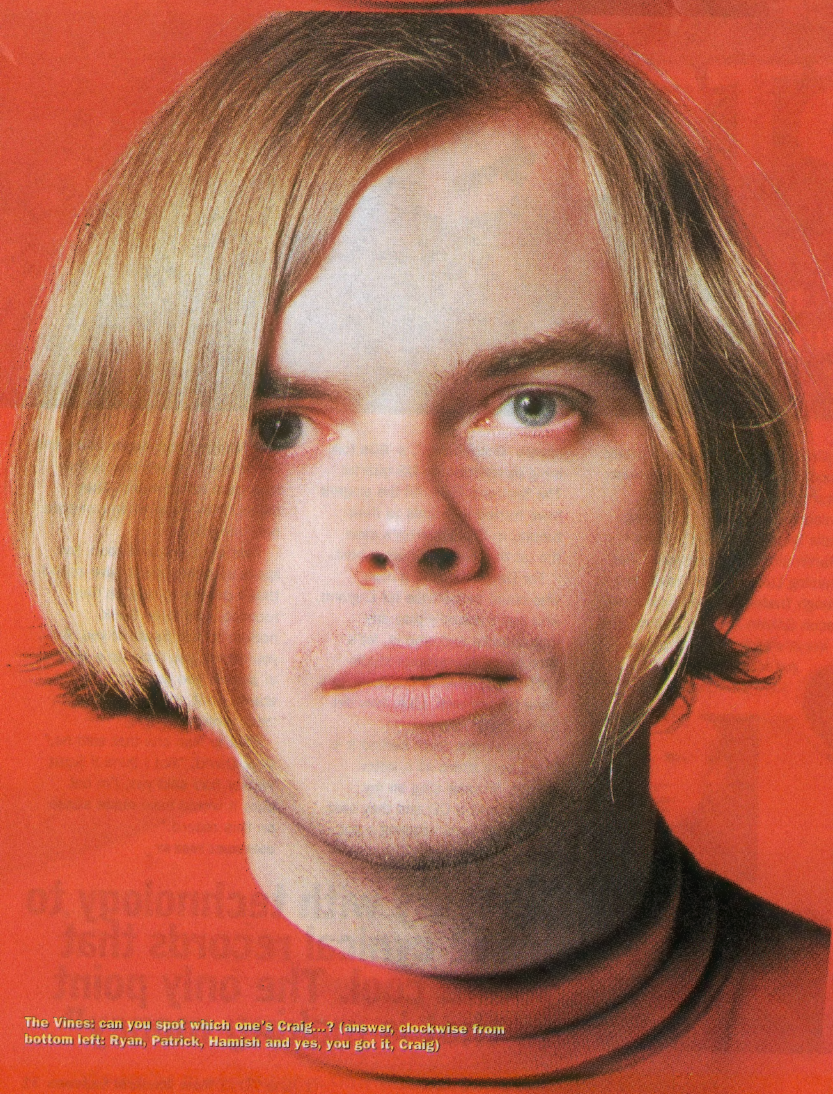
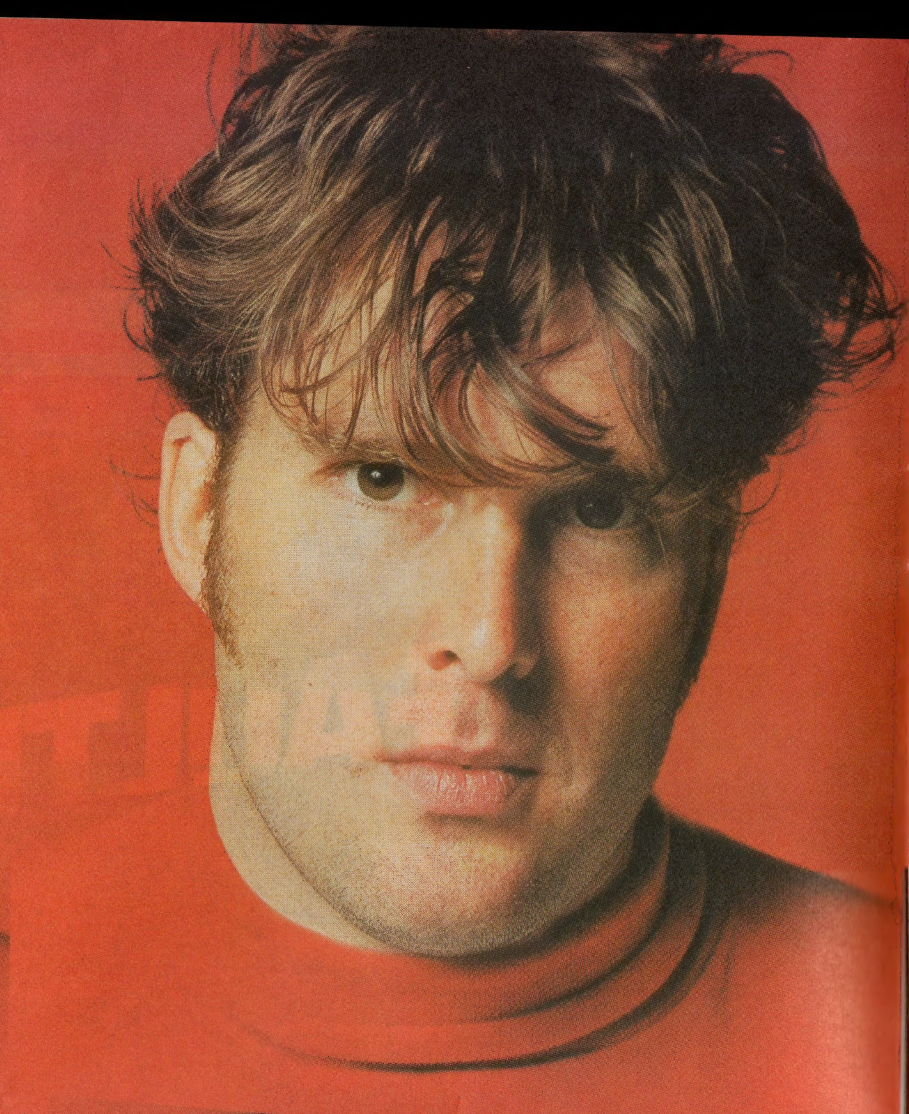
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The Vines: can you spot which one's Craig...? (answer, clockwise from bottom left: Ryan, Patrick, Hamish and yes, you got it, Craig)

CRAZY SEXY COOL

WHY THE VINES ARE THE MUST-SEE BAND OF 2002

Text: James Oldham Photography: Tom Sheehan

Look, I can't do this. I really can't do this. I don't know why I'm telling you all this evil shit. Can you just erase it? I want it to stop..."

We're backstage at LA's Coachella Festival, and Craig Nicholls – singer with The Vines, the most brilliant new band of 2002 – is flipping out. *NME* has been interviewing him for just 15 minutes inside a cramped, silver caravan. It's mid-afternoon and the heat is oppressive but that's not why he's lost it. He's been like this from the outset. Our first question was about whereabouts, in Sydney, he comes from.

"I'm not sure I can tell you that."

Really?

"No, I don't think it's a good idea. There'll be some crazy person who reads this and comes to find me."

Craig stares at us. We try to tell him it doesn't matter because he lives in LA now but he ignores us. He starts to say that when he was 17 he seriously thought about killing himself. We ask him how seriously.

"Very seriously," he frowns, violently rubbing his hair with his hand. "I thought it might make things easier. Otherwise you're just going around in the same circles or going in a straight line or going somewhere and what's the point? But I couldn't go through with it. You'd have to cut your wrists or something..."

His voice tails off momentarily. For five minutes or so, we manage to talk about the chronology of the band. He seems to be calmed, but then he starts talking about playing live.

"I hate planes and cars and all that smoke and being in them," he says, his voice rising, "and now they're just making me get in them the whole time. I just want to record. I've got all these songs in my head and I'm going to lose them if I'm not careful. I'll forget them. Brian Wilson never had to tour and nor did The Beatles, because there was all that screaming. I need to be recording, I need to be doing it now, but they won't let me..."

"I enjoy playing live, but it's a headfuck for me, because it's really emotional. It's physically and mentally exhausting" Craig Nicholls

It's at this point that Craig starts hyperventilating, and his face goes apple-red. He's having an anxiety attack. He stands up and tries to grab the dictaphone: "Look I can't do this..."

We grab the dictaphone back and tell him it's OK, we'll try again later. He looks like he's about to smash the place up. We try to calm him down, but it's impossible. He turns away, heads to the toilet and locks the door. It's another three hours before he comes out.

Craig has had these 'episodes' before. The last major one was when the band were performing on *Later With Jools Holland*... in April. At the end of a camera rehearsal, he swung his guitar at bassist Patrick Mathews' head and when he missed, kung fu kicked him in the chest.

When we get out of the caravan and tell the band about his panic attack, they barely look up. The band's second guitarist, Ryan Griffiths – the one who looks like River Phoenix – just says, "Don't worry about it. He does this sort of thing all the time."

There's little doubt that the 24-year-old Craig Nicholls is different. A slight and fragile figure, he's as musically precocious as anyone *NME's* ever met. In July, The Vines will release one of the most amazing debut albums of the last decade. Named after their first Top 40 hit – 'Highly Evolved' – it's a masterpiece of raw, melodic songwriting, veering from the yelped garage of 'Ain't No Room' and 'In The Jungle' through to the clipped tranquillity of 'Homesick' and 'Autumn Shade'. It contains 12 songs, but could easily have featured 112, so prolific is Craig's writing. And therein lies the problem.

Craig has an addictive personality. Once he finds something he likes, he does it all the time. For instance, he eats junk food at every meal and his mouth is never far away from a bong. Patrick will later confide that such behaviour – particularly the amount of dope he smokes – has "a big effect" on him, explaining: "Craig shuts the world out so he can focus. I don't think he likes too much information to

be going in. We're similar in that we're both like sleepyheads. We don't want anything to be too real. Everything's easier if you're half-asleep."

These obsessive behaviour patterns dog everything Craig does. It's why he doesn't like going out, preferring instead to sit indoors watching TV. That in turn means he doesn't like playing live either, because it means both going outside and travelling, something he also hates with a passion. All he really wants is to be allowed to record the band's second album – which he's already written all the songs for – as soon as possible. He doesn't understand why he can't. At times, he's extremely childlike in the way he acts and thinks.

The first time we meet him is at a photo shoot on La Brea Avenue in central LA, the day before Coachella. When he enters the room, he looks like a cartoon: a tiny figure in a Kermit-green jacket, ripped jeans and Day-Glo pink trainers. He immediately asks to be taken to McDonald's. When he returns he starts sucking on his bong, taking his shoes and socks off and giggling hysterically. He puts on Muse's 'Origin Of Symmetry' album at deafening volume and asks whether he can stay in the studio all day. When someone starts talking about Iggy Pop, he says: "I've read about Iggy Pop. He made loud music and didn't like wearing a shirt. Can we go to Wendy's now?" He's in another world entirely.

All of which would be fine if there wasn't so much expected of him. In the States, The Vines are signed to Capitol, who have made the band their number one priority for the year ahead. There's a lot of money resting on them. Their debut album alone took six months to record at LA's Sunset Sound Studio complex. They worked six days a week in a studio that cost about \$800 a day, so do your own maths.

That's why when it reaches 9.30pm, a full five hours after our interview ended so abruptly, there are so many anxious faces in the tent over in the corner of the Coachella site. All the Capitol bigwigs have gathered to see what's going to happen when – and indeed, if – The Vines take to the stage.

When Craig first appears, careering wildly across the stage, with spittle arcing from his mouth and his guitar wrapped around the back of his body, it's hard not to fear the worst. For the first 20 minutes, he performs as if he could self-destruct at any moment. But he doesn't. Instead, he plays with such ferocious abandon, it's impossible to take your eyes off him.

When his guitar cuts out midway through 'Outta The Way', he just stands and screams into his microphone. 'Highly Evolved', meanwhile, is performed with such taut intensity that you can see the rest of the band (Patrick, Ryan and drummer Hamish Rosser) just staring at him in awe. By the time they reach their conclusion, a meltdown-version of '1969', Craig is on his knees, eyes rolled back in their sockets, his thumb pointing to the floor. Then he hurls his guitar away and strides offstage.

The next day, *NME* is driven to Palm Springs, where Craig is staying in an airy apartment block in the middle of a sedate retirement complex. We've stopped off at McDonald's on the way, so he's delighted to see us. You can tell he's much calmer; he's smiling and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. The only moment of tension occurs when he can't work the microwave to heat up his fries. He stands with his nose touching it, randomly hammering at buttons until one of the band's three managers walks over and shows him how it works.

Once he's eaten, he settles down in an armchair, lights his bong and starts to talk. He instantly begins to apologise for yesterday: "We had to wake up early in the morning and I wanted to see (*American singer-songwriter*) Pete Dinklage and I guess all my eating was fucked-up and there were other personal things going on. I was kinda anxious about playing. I knew we were playing late and there was a part of me that just wanted to go on in the afternoon so I could get some food and some sleep. That was probably the worst I've ever felt, so I'm sorry you had to see it..."

We ask him about the suicide thing, saying that we don't want to make too much of it. He just brushes it away.

"I think I was exaggerating it," he says, softly. "It was definitely there, but it's hard to tell. I don't know if there are people in the world who've never thought about suicide. I guess I felt depressed like a lot of other people, like teenagers get. I didn't want to deal with the grown-ups. It's hard to tell how serious I was. Was I just thinking about it? Or was I seriously considering doing it? I don't know..."

This vagueness is a defining trait of his interview technique. The specifics of his upbringing in Sydney, for instance, are difficult to pin down, not least because he seems unable or unwilling to recall them

CONTINUES OVER



Palm Springs, California.
May 2002.
The evolution starts here

"I knew I couldn't get a job. I couldn't fit in socially. I guess I felt immature. I felt fucked up" Craig Nicholls

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

in any detail. He says that he always felt awkward and that he's "always been like this", but he doesn't say what 'this' actually is. He's also prone to lengthy bouts of reverie. For instance: "I can remember being a little kid at school and I'd be daydreaming on my own outside in a field, sitting on some grass next to a tree, looking up at the sky with the sun there. That's what I wanted because it made sense to me. Everything else was like a big machine."

What's certain is that his father had been a musician at some point in the '60s, playing guitar in a group called The Vynes (from whom Craig got the name of his own band) and releasing a couple of garage rock singles on small, independent labels.

Craig met bassist Patrick Mathews nine years ago, when he was 15 and working at McDonald's. They were both avid fans of Nirvana and began playing together, joined on drums by David Olliffe, a friend of Patrick's. Craig left school soon after, at the age of 16, before doing a graphic design course for a year and then enrolling in art school in 1995. The only reason he did so was to keep his parents happy, having no genuine interest in the subject itself.

"I never really wanted to go to school," he explains with a smile, "because I didn't really want to do anything. I just wanted to stay at home. As soon as school was over, I thought, 'Cool, now I can just stay at home all the time', but my parents were, like, 'You can't just do that, you've got to do something'."

Music was the only thing that fired him. He listened to Nirvana obsessively and when he got tired of them, he moved on to The Beatles, the Kinks, then Suede and so on. Most of the time, he just used to sit in his room and stare out of the window.

After six months at art school, he quit. His parents went ballistic.

"They did know (*about the music*)," he sighs. "I'd tell them about it when they asked what I was going to do. They weren't very impressed, though. I guess they just didn't want me to be a bum."

"I knew I couldn't get a job. I guess I felt immature or under it or above it. I felt fucked up, like I couldn't do it. I didn't think I'd messed up, I just thought I couldn't get a job. Part of it probably was laziness because I am weak and small. That's a fact. I just wanted to use my brain..."

"Songwriting was like an escape from the world. I wanted to stay at home but my brain is too big to watch TV all the time. So when I wasn't watching TV, I'd be daydreaming and thinking of songs and escaping into a nicer place or a more evil place. It was an escape from reality."

The idea of the group, then, became Craig's first real addiction. It also coincided with Patrick introducing him to pot. The combination of this, as well as the fact that he rarely left his bedroom, let alone the house, led to inevitable friction. His parents put a block on the video channel, so he couldn't spend all day watching it. Patrick claims they also used to occasionally call the police when Craig would have one of his 'episodes', though Craig makes no mention of this.

The group would rarely play live, playing maybe ten shows in a period of a couple of years. Instead, they'd just amass songs. All Craig really wanted to do was make an album.

"For me, the performance side of what we do is like five per cent. It only exists because it has to. Even when we were making our first demos and we

used to play little gigs in pubs, we only did it because that's what other bands did."

He's so ambivalent about playing live that he recently suggested that someone filmed one of their shows and then anyone who wanted to see them could just buy a tape.

"That would be great, wouldn't it?" he enthuses. "I think it would be a much greater performance. You could rework tracks and get good lighting and sound. You'd be able to see the bass player's face or the whole band. That's what an artist is, you do what you want. People don't tell you what to do."

Despite their unconventional approach, how The Vines got from sitting in their bedrooms to recording in LA was actually relatively straightforward. Two years ago, a friend of theirs with a radio show played one of their demos, which quickly led to them being picked up by their current management company. From there they hooked up with Engine Room, a production company that funds the making of albums and then sells them on to record labels. They mailed out a handful of demos and producer Rob Schnapf, based in LA and the man behind Beck's 'Mellow Gold' among others, sent back an email that simply said: "The Vines!" over and over again. Suddenly, the band found themselves on a flight to America.

The band arrived in LA on July 11, 2001. They were driven to the Highland Gardens Hotel (the place where Janis Joplin OD'd) and given a week to get themselves acclimatised. Given Craig's strange behavioural patterns, it's surprising that he settled down so quickly, but he did.

"When we got to LA," he explains, "I had all these ideas and I was flipping out. I'd wanted to make this

album for years, the songs were building up and it was really exciting. Suddenly we were in the middle of it and it was really cool."

Craig was so obsessed with the whole recording process, it seems that he failed to detect that the band was falling apart. Drummer David Olliffe couldn't cope with the situation at all. He was at loggerheads with Rob Schnapf almost constantly and, after two months, he flew home. He's since been replaced by Rosser and has given interviews where he calls the producer "the biggest c— there is". Patrick says that he "really wanted to go home" too, finding the whole experience "lonely" and "weird".

When we ask Craig about these fraught sessions, he seems oblivious to what we're talking about.

"Fraught? Does that mean tension?" he asks quizzically. "For me, it was great; there wasn't any tension at all. I was totally excited. I guess Dave was nervous about playing, and he didn't get on with Rob. Sometimes if he couldn't get the drum track right away, he might get a little upset. I'd talk him through it, though. I think he did amazing stuff and I was really proud of him. Patrick, too."

But despite these interruptions (there was also a period halfway through where the money dried up and they were stranded for two months with nothing to do), the end result is pretty close to perfection.

"I wanted us to make the greatest album we could make," Craig says bluntly. "I thought if we weren't going to do anything with our first album, we were never going to do anything at all."

"I want all our albums to be good, like all the great bands I listen to, like Suede and Swervedriver and The Beatles. All their albums are great, but they're all different. I want the same thing. I just wanted to make a full piece of work."

By the start of 2002, The Vines had been signed to Capitol in America and Heavenly in Britain. From there, you probably know the rest. Their major label debut, the 95-second 'Highly Evolved', went to Number 32 in April, and the band appeared on every major British music TV programme – *Later...*, *Top Of The Pops* and *CD:UK* – in the space of a week.

The only clouds on the horizon are litigation with Olliffe (apparently now resolved) and Craig's own mental situation. His reluctance to play live has always been known to those around him, it's just recently it seems to have got more pronounced. When we start to talk about it, it's clear that the problem is unlikely simply to disappear.

"I just don't want my voice to run out," insists Craig. "I want to be productive. I don't want to be a fucking waster. I enjoy playing live, but it's a big headfuck for me, because it's really emotional. It's physically and mentally exhausting."

Likewise, his obsession with recording the next album is something he keeps coming back to again and again. Just before our interview is curtailed because the band have to go to a photo shoot, he concludes: "I want to go back into the studio soon. I want to have a couple of months off just doing nothing, getting my energy and enthusiasm back."

"I've got a lot of new songs, I've got all these ideas. Everything is becoming clearer. I feel really positive about it. It's going to be a fun time..."

A few days after *NME* gets back to Britain, we happen to get talking about Craig with the MD of a major record company. He says the only people he's ever come across who were equally obsessed with recording were Kurt Cobain and Richey Edwards. With hindsight, he says, he can now see that was because they knew they weren't going to be around for long. With Craig, it's hard to know whether the same applies. His obsession with songwriting and recording has been constant for the last nine years. Once he focuses on something, he pursues it to its ultimate end. As one of his management team points out, it's lucky that he's only addicted to weed.

As for his phobia about playing live, in the week after we leave him the band manage to play gigs in San Diego, San Francisco and LA without incident. They will also return to Britain later this month to play more shows, as well as Glastonbury, so maybe that part of his life is under control.

As for the rest, his episodes and obsessions are definitely part of the reason why The Vines have made such a fantastic debut album, but they also might be the thing that destroys them before they've even started. Our advice is simple: see them soon. You never know. It could be the only chance you get.

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